

Julius Caesar: Drama, Legend, History

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The play that bears the title *Julius Caesar* does not deal with the tragedy of Caesar himself. The person confronted with a tragic dilemma is somebody else, namely Marcus Brutus. Furthermore, for people who have been brought up on classical studies or who have read the *Bellum Gallicum*, the presentation of Caesar in this drama is not a little disquieting. We do not discover the great man of action. Instead, a man whose language is often pompous, whose behavior is wavering and uncertain. On the morning of the 15th of March, will he or will he not go into the Senate House? Someone says about him, "*He is superstitious grown of late.*" Emphasis is put on his physical fragility. For example, he says to Antony, "*Come on my right hand, for this ear is deaf.*" And, much worse, there is what Cassius relates. When Caesar had challenged him to a swimming match in the river Tiber, Caesar was just not good enough: "*Help me, Cassius, or I sink!*"

Now the three items I mention are not to be found in Plutarch, Shakespeare's main source; that is to say, he made them up. Therefore, we can use Shakespeare for a certain degree of guidance. Just as when we're dealing with ancient historians, such as Thucydides or Tacitus, the things that they make up – i.e., speeches or digressions – have a singular value. Not only the inventions that I have mentioned, but the presentation of Caesar, the despot, is illuminating in various respects. For example, by a touch of genius, Shakespeare makes Caesar refer to himself in the third person. "*Shall Caesar send a lie?*" or "*Caesar doth not wrong*"; or, again, when Caesar emphasizes his virtues of courage and resolution and generosity (but perhaps in an exaggerated form) he says, "*If I could pray to move. prayers would move me: But I am constant as the Northern Star.*"

We ask ourselves, is Caesar wishing to give confidence to others? Or to himself? And is he not overplaying his role? For example, when he compares himself to Danger personified, declaring:

*"Danger knows full well
That Caesar is more dangerous than he.
We are two lions littered in one day,
And I the elder and more terrible."*

This outburst takes one back about sixty years to Italy of the 1920s. It is an exhibition of *terribilità* (to use the Italian term). One is reminded of the famous aphorism of the leader: "Better one day of a lion than a hundred years of a sheep!"

Now, what are we to do with this presentation of Caesar? One could say, "It doesn't matter, for it is only the art of a dramatist. It doesn't represent the facts about him." On which note we should pause and ask, what are the facts?

Wise before the event

There is a certain amount of evidence, some from contemporaries, and better – or shall I say worse? – a pair of biographies composed no less than 150 years after the death of Caesar the dictator, the biographies of Suetonius and of Plutarch, which of course tell us some illustrative anecdotes and give, as it were, glimpses of the future. For example, in Plutarch's biography, Caesar, in Spain, entering a temple and seeing the statue of Alexander the Macedonian bursts into tears, for what had he, Caesar, achieved, when Alexander at his age had conquered the world? Now this is almost the Caesar who knows in advance that he is going to be the subject of one half of a pair of parallel lives recounted by Plutarch.

But this is not really the worst. There is the presentation of Caesar in modern works as, from his early years, discerning that the one remedy for the ills of Rome was absolute power and, for himself, directing his sole ambitions thereto. The influence is still perceptible of Mommsen's *History of Rome* written about 130 years ago. That is to say, Caesar put on exhibit as the statesman of preternatural insight and planning power, who establishes the monarchy because he had willed it thus. Fortunately, Mommsen did not go on to his next volume of Roman history – namely, on Augustus – for he would have got into trouble there. If Julius Caesar has already founded the monarchy at Rome (though for a brief tenure), what are we going to do with Caesar Augustus?

The persisting effect of a work of literary genius is still potent. But it represents, this concentration on the single person of Caesar, a false view of the late Republic. In the modern world authors are writing biographies of Caesar or of Cicero all the time. Now you can write a biography of Cicero. But probably not of Caesar. The practice of biography blinds posterity to an important observation concerning both Rome of the aristocratic republic and Rome of the aristocratic monarchy, namely that the true subject is the history of the governing class. We have to see how Caesar fitted in with his contemporaries, how far he is different from them. We have to consider, for example, the stages of his career: whereas Pompey the Great became consul without having been even a senator, and was consul at an early age, Caesar went through the regular order of magistracies in Rome.

Acquiring enemies and debts

What did Caesar first set out to do? His family, though of the most ancient nobility of all – the patriciate – had not been notably successful during the previous 100 or 150 years. In the

recent civil wars, out of which had emerged the temporary despotism of Sulla the Dictator, Caesar's family had been on the other side. And Caesar had married, in fact, when very young, the daughter of one of the leaders of the faction overthrown by Cornelius Sulla. Therefore, he and certain other aristocrats at Rome had to struggle in order to get what they wanted first of all, namely to bring back the consul ship to their family. For the term *nobilis* in Rome, though not a legal term, had the connotation of ancestors who had held the supreme power in the Roman state. I say the supreme power, but of course the consul ship lasted only for one year and was shared with somebody else. Nevertheless, as an example of the behavior of the decayed *nobilis*, Caesar's struggle is worth noting. As the historian Sallust, not much later, was to say: politics was a desperate and corrupt game; you needed to be bold and lavish.

Why bold? In order to show people that you were worth following and not frightened of anybody. Therefore the young nobleman very often, early in his career, when aged seventeen, eighteen, nineteen, mounts an attack on some prominent politician. The "new man," at that age, is hesitant because he needs, instead, protection. Tacitus, referring to the hazardous and even murderous life of the late Republic, writes of the actual glory of making enemies or prosecuting feuds: "*Ipsa inimicitiarum gloria.*"

Now in modern politics it is presumably not a good thing to make enemies. The politician tends rather to be ingratiating and benevolent. That was not always the case in Rome: the man of ambition is not afraid of anybody. Again, in the modern world, it wouldn't be a good thing for a politician to contract large debts. But the brief paradox about Roman political life is that it's a good thing not only to make enemies, but to become indebted. For the obvious reason that your backers have to support you later on. And, of course, in recent times, the habit of certain governments of borrowing large sums of money from banks simply means that they can blackmail the banks. They don't necessarily pay the money back. In Roman political life, the people who backed you would profit at the end from their investment.

Caesar first came into prominence, great prominence, in the year in which he was elected praetor, the year 63, for a reason: that the office of head of the state religion (pontifex maximus) fell vacant. Normally the office was held by a senior statesman, but on this occasion, by brilliant electoral devices, Caesar gained it. What was the value of it? I suspect Caesar had done quite a lot of study of Roman religious antiquities, but the office was, in fact, a great source of political patronage.

Second, when on the fifth of December of that year the Senate was called upon to decide what to do with the associates of Catilina, who had plotted to seize power by force, Caesar took a bold line in favor of moderation. As he assumed, the Roman Senate was not a court of law; but people wanted to condemn to death Catilina's associates. Among them was the great conservative Cato, regarded by many as a champion of legality (largely because of his

later fate, perishing for the Republic). But in this instance Caesar, the ostensible revolutionary, was the man who defended legality and warned the Senate against violating it.

Now what was Caesar seeking? The praetorship, certainly; and three years later the consulate. The political constellation was favorable because Pompey the Great needed an active consul to put through legislation. When you have become consul, for certain of the *nobiles*, this may be the crown of ambition because you have brought back the consulate to your family and you might now opt for a quiet life or for the decorative role of senior statesman. But Caesar wanted military glory, and he got it in Gaul.

One-sided match

Now I take a leap of fifteen years, leaving out the conquest of Gaul and the civil war against Pompey and against the cause of the Republic, a war that extended over the Mediterranean world. We come to the year 44, February. What is now the position of Caesar? In fact, monarchic. Is it what he wanted? Not necessarily. For to people like Caesar, the Republic suited them very well. Politics was the most absorbing of all games. But unfortunately, Caesar could not go on playing this game anymore. Because in a game, any game, you've got to have rules and competitors. In this case, there were no competitors left. And he had wrecked the playground.

What had his plea been when taking up arms? To defend the rights of the Roman tribunes, which the Senate disregarded in January 49. Not that Caesar thought very much of them – they were a kind of excuse – but also to protect his own rank, honour, and dignity from his personal enemies. The Latin word is "*dignitas*." The result was civil war, with Caesar at the end of it supreme in power and isolated. His rivals were dead, his main adherents hadn't the standing or the character to influence him. Later on, his grandnephew Octavian, who, beginning as a young adventurer, became Caesar Augustus, was able to take advice from persons older than himself. But who was to give Caesar advice?

Obviously there was much to be done after victory, such as reconciliation with the defeated party, the exercise of clemency – for which Caesar has been much praised. But we should note that clemency in Rome was not the virtue of an aristocrat or a citizen. Clemency is the mercifulness of somebody who can put you to death. That is to say, a god, a tyrant, or a master of slaves. Therefore Caesar, by refraining from putting to death some of his political adversaries, failed to earn much gratitude from them. What then was the man to do if we assume that, ruthless in his pursuit of ambition, he had destroyed what he really liked: competition and showing that he was better than other people – which wasn't very difficult when we think of some of them, whether the Roman aristocrats who were heavyweights (the Latin word is *stolidi*), or the lightweights (the *vani*, the empty ones).

The best death?

My point is the tragedy of Caesar: that he had not wanted to reign alone and supreme. What therefore is a man to do under these circumstances? Could he abdicate? Not quite. Go away to the wars? Yes, he proposed to do that, to go to Macedonia and to the East – not a necessary task, but much more attractive than staying in Rome and having to explain things to people or argue with people. For all those years he had been careering about Gaul and later about the Mediterranean, making his own decisions in a trenchant fashion (*"Veni, vidi, vici!"*); and when you are in the habit of doing that kind of thing, it's rather difficult to revert to civilian life – especially when there isn't much of it left anymore, in view of your own predominance.

We have the report on various evidence that Caesar was disillusioned. He said himself, of course, "My life has been long enough, whether you reckon it in years or in glory!" Some of his friends said that he didn't really want to live. And there is evidence of his being in poor health. That might have been one way out. Caesar was now fifty-five and many people just died at that age. Perhaps he would never have come back from the campaigns. Otherwise, we can think of Caesar in Rome as a tragic failure. We might almost say that this man was looking for assassination.

The best death is the quickest: so he declared at the dinner party held in the mansion of Lepidus on March 14. On the next day, according to Shakespeare, Caesar speaks to his wife as follows:

*Of all the wonders that I yet have heard
It seems to me most strange that men should fear,
Seeing that death, a necessary end,
Will come when it will come.*

This article was first published in the New York Review of Books in February 1985. Sir Ronald Syme O. M. published The Roman Revolution, probably the most influential book of this century on Roman history, in 1939. He was Camden Professor at Oxford for many years, and now lives there in 'retirement' (hardly the right word).